

Power Politics among Abeokuta Elites in the 19th Century

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Abstract

This paper challenges the idea that pre-colonial Egba society was hierarchical, immutable and stable by pointing to the struggles and contestations among elite identities over power. It challenges the myths of royal absolutism and underscores the fact that power was fluid with elite structures challenging and complementing one another. That power was fluid accounts for the relative ease with which educated Africans found space to carve an ambiguous elite identity and to participate in power. The paper concludes that such complex engagements among elites better explain the political history of Abeokuta than a transition model which sees the modern displacing the traditional.

Introduction

This paper is driven by two broad objectives. First, I intend to show the complex interactions among elite groups as they contested for power in 19th century Abeokuta. Second, I seek to show that Egba society in Abeokuta was formed as a consequence of these contestations and interactions among elite groups. This pursuit challenges assumptions and preconceptions about how African societies were formed and shaped, and the roles of African elites in the process.

Existing writing is dominated by a displacement model which generally posits that modern Africa was shaped by colonial rule and according to European ideals. Central to this model is the notion that African society was pushed from its stable traditional past to an inevitable modern future by which a European-created elite progressively sidelined a traditional elite to inherit power in the post-colonial state. The European intrusion is depicted as destroying (or modernizing) stable hegemonies by displacing elite structures and conventions of power. However, the formation of elite groups and contestations over power predate and transcend European influence and colonisation. Far from stable hegemonies, pre-colonial societies in Nigeria (as elsewhere in Africa), witnessed changes in their politics which were fallouts of ideological discourses and contestations over the form of society and how to rule it. Similarly, the assumptions that colonial elites constituted a category apart, were counterposed to traditional elites, or that they were exclusively equipped with modernist credentials and thereby easily secured social legitimacy, obscure a complex historical process of elite identity formation and search for power. That process pitched an amorphous educated elite with and against other equally indefinable local elite groups not just to wield power but to define what power was in a new and changing social context.

Abeokuta, the case under study, was a society in the making in the 19th century. Established only in 1830 by refugees escaping from the Yoruba wars, Abeokuta was engaged for much of

this century in securing its borders from external enemies and with constituting relations among the disparate refugee identities. In such a nascent environment of diversity, power had no definite meaning or structure and there was no stable hegemony. Rather, elites and elite groups were being formed and shaped as they struggled to shape society and how it was ruled. This paper revisits the well-worn tracks of Egba and Yoruba historiography to show that traditional and modern elite categories were not differentiated and that the interconnections among them defined the structure and culture of power and ultimately how Egba society was formed during the 19th century.

Identifying the Elites in the African Context

Historians often focus on elites above other groups. Underlying this concentration is the notion that society can best be studied through its leaders. Since leadership cannot be limited to the very pinnacle of the political structure, the study of leadership requires latitude which includes not only formal government officials and bureaucrats but also professionals and other informal agencies of power. Accounting for social change draws scholars to examine the decisions that are made by leaders and the positive and constraining influences that impinge on decision-making. It has been usual to study societies in terms of the actions of dominant and competing elites.

With particular reference to Africa, the study of history has been dependent on the elite as analytical and methodological tools. Not only have the accounts been focused on the activities of leaders, elites are also represented as culture brokers. Anthropologists and historians alike have depended on local elites - headmen, school teachers, religion specialists - as the repositories of local knowledge and the middlemen between local peoples and the wider world. The writings of elites constitute a significant stock of the archive from which historical reconstruction is made. Therefore, elites are not only agents of social change, they are also the sources for its explication. However, despite their centrality to African history, what has been lacking is a model for analyzing elites.

Who then are elites? Marcus (1983:21) observes that the typical public definitions and most academic usages of the term obscure more than they explicate. Conventional usage applies elite to almost any powerful, upper class, wealthy, privileged person, who is also assumed to be more intelligent. Rather than such a wide spectrum, a society's elite is a creation of the relations of power within it. To make it a useful analytical tool, politically significant elite must be clearly distinguished from the social upper caste and the economic upper class. In the same vein, Field *et al* (1990: 49-82) suggest that an *organized* capacity to influence political outcomes regularly and substantially marks the elite from the privileged. To this extent, the elite consists of established leaders and those at the top of the political, social and economic pyramids on one hand, and a counter-elite including the leaders of mass societies who can affect social outcomes by negation or collaboration, on the other. By this measure, many writers limit national elite to a few thousands depending on the size of the nation. These authors reckon that there are fewer than two thousand persons who may qualify as elites for all countries during the early modern historical period and all but the most populous developing countries today.

Therefore, access to and ability to deploy power is critical to identifying elites. Power is an equally elusive concept partly because of its range of conceptual applications. At its simplest meaning, it connotes causal effects by one on another. Most accounts of African political history emphasize the control of the principal over the subaltern. Studies of colonial rule highlight the coercive powers of the state, its military and punitive exercises, its legal institutions and its administrative policies (including the use of local rulers in Indirect Rule) as the important means of social formation. This restricted view limits power to its coercive attributes and conceptualizes elites as those who engage coercion as collaborators or resisters. It leaves out a whole dimension of influences that operates outside of official structures but whose thoughts and activities contribute to the shaping of society.

These divergent conceptualisations of power fit precisely into the debate among elite theorists between those who conceive of elites as the “power-elite” and the pluralists who contend for a wider range of elite influences beyond the close confines of government and bureaucracy. If the notion of a “power-elite” is applied to Africa’s history through the 19th and 20th centuries, then the educated would not qualify and the theory will be hard-pressed to account for their sudden appearance as leaders in the post-colonial state (Vansina, 1994). In reality, power is not concentrated in official structures only, but it is widely diffused through the society. Scott (1994:37) is of the view that the shaping of society is through a complex interaction of repressive and persuasive power where people are discursively formed into subalterns with or without a direct coercive action on the part of the state. Africa was not simply shaped by colonial power and its complying or resisting local elites. Critical to social formation were the thoughts and activities, persuasive influences and advisement of power-wielding but non-coercive elites.

Therefore, the African elite are much more diverse than the overarching binaries of collaborators and resisters, or traditional and modern, suggest. However, such a diffused conception of power and pluralist elite structure is not common in the scholarly treatment of Africa. For instance, the account of elite formation and roles among the Biu-Mandara of northeastern Nigeria is a typical depiction of African elite structure: the pre-colonial system dominated by *Pabir* rulers is one based on a close-knit elite sustained by hereditary, lineage and an elite subculture. It is “more aristocratic, more closed, less accountable, and less responsive to other than its own needs and support” (Cohen, 1983:74). British conquest and missionary activities created intellectuals who “began teaching school and used their literacy and knowledge of the wider provincial and regional settings to organize opposition” against *Pabir* excesses, making sure to keep “within the (colonial) law so as to remain beyond the reach of the formidable colonial control.” By contesting and winning local elections, the intellectuals succeeded in changing the local rules and ultimately in securing leadership as colonialism ended (Cohen, 1983:78).

Similar imagery informs the treatment of the Tswana in Southern Africa. They describe the colonial encounter between the Tswana and European missionaries beginning from a stable African hegemony under which conventions on cosmology, rituals and customs in pre-colonial times had changed only slightly when there were contestations over succession, rainmaking and lineage power. In the account, the stable *Setswana* ways became complicated

by the intrusion of European modernity (*sekgoa*) to create a colonial situation which the Africans engaged with, resisted and adapted to (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1989, 1991 & 1997).

The notion that the elite structure of pre-colonial African societies was closed, lineage-based, totalitarian and autocratic pervades the literature. Examples such as the Zulu, Dahomey and Asante monarchies readily justify such ideas. Notwithstanding that these were political systems that developed out of the peculiar conditions of the 18th and 19th centuries involving, among other things, the end of the Atlantic slave trade and the rise of new commodity trades, they are taken to define pre-colonial Africa. It follows then that the elite structure of pre-colonial societies with “simple politics” needs only be described and not analysed. This is the claim that Carlton (1996:17) makes by stating that studying elite is more “naturally” and easily possible for earlier societies that had well-established and often unquestioned, hierarchical organisations.

The underlying assumption is that African societies always had stable and unquestioned hegemonies until the complications or sophistication of European modernity. There is however much in the history of the Egba to argue the contrary. The 19th century upheavals did not produce autocratic systems like those of Asante or Dahomey. In this century, power was intensely contested by a mixed variety of elite groups and the interactions among these groups contributed to the shaping of Egba society. These elite groups, including but not limited to the Obas, Ogboni, Parakoyi, and Ologun, representing different political traditions and the multiple factions within each of them, operated in a structure that was partly hierarchical and partly pluralistic. The structure and the comparative stability it offered provided European missionaries, liberated slaves and African returnees from Sierra Leone a platform for involvement. The educated elites did not turn an otherwise stable elite structure upside down. Rather they entered into ongoing struggles among elite groups about power and how it was used to shape society.

Elite Categories and Local Politics

The image of a simple, hierarchical and pre-modern traditional system has shaped our understanding of pre-colonial politics. Typically, the system in centralised states is depicted as totalitarian in which local elite groups compete within stable hegemonies for chiefly office and patronage. Such systems are assumed to be largely immutable, and fundamental changes only occur from outside in the form of conquest or powerful cultural intrusions. They are depicted as historical and stable and ideologically uncontested.

Not enough is known about the Egba before their settlement in Abeokuta to give an accurate depiction of their society. Most commentaries have built on the fragmentary accounts of writers, missionaries and explorers and on local histories or oral traditions collected in the 19th and 20th centuries. From these, a synthesis of traditions appears to have been built which situates the Egba as one of the Yoruba subgroups (Biobaku, 1957:19). Most accounts of the Egba past appear as deductions from the more generic Yoruba nationality (Peel, 2001; Doortmont, 1991:173). The Egba are assumed to have been organised in ways similar to other Yoruba groups deriving their political institutions from the Yoruba source, Ile-Ife. Thus Sabiru Biobaku notes that “in the organization of their communities the Egba did not

differ from one another or from the Yoruba in general. The basis of their communal life was the town.” Citing Dr. E. C. Irvin, the Christian missionary who passed through the ruins of Egba towns in 1854, Biobaku (1957:5) calculated these towns to be very small indeed. He described the Egba as being organised in a federation of three monarchies: Ake, Oke-Ona and Gbagura, among which the *Alake* (of Ake) was the ultimate judge. Each of these provinces comprised ancestral-kinship towns or villages. The Gbagura comprised “144 towns in the Egba forest,” all ruled by a principal monarch, the *Agura* of Gbagura. The author goes on to state that “the head of each town was an *Oba*, who was the ultimate source of justice in the town. He was also the High Priest, but never a despot” (Biobaku, 1957:8).

The power of the *Oba* was checked by the *Ogboni*, an elite council, who were more or less the real rulers of the town. At least in nomenclature, the *Ogboni*, appears to be a peculiar Egba institution. Other indigenous political structures include the *Parakoyi*, chiefs of the organised guilds of traders and craftsmen, and the *ode*, usually made up of hunters but who were also vested with the responsibilities of maintaining law and order. Women were also organised along guild lines and chiefly women were known to be power brokers.

A major weakness of oral tradition as a source of historical reconstruction is that it lacks chronology. Without chronology it becomes difficult for the historians to determine what is traditional or customary. By depicting these political institutions as static and immutable, the process of their formation and transformation is obscured. Indeed, 19th century Egba elites were not limited to those in customary offices. As missionary records show, the axis of power was much more widely diffused. Local chiefs retained their own militias and organised bands of slave raiders, called *Onisunmomi* in local parlance; these chiefs, many of them outside the official structures of power, exercised considerable influence. Local medicine-men, *Babalawo* or *onisegun* and the guild of blacksmiths played leading social and political roles in the uncertain environment of the 19th century. Far from being an immutable and unchanging political system, the elite structure of the Egba was as varied as it was amorphous. Vaughan (2000) has correctly noted that the failure of existing knowledge to capture the transformative capacities of chiefly power accounts for the dilemma over their survival and roles in modern African politics. In the following section, I analyse the main elite categories with a view to laying the basis for a more open and inclusive approach to the study of elites and their roles in the making of Egba society.

The Yoruba *Oba*: “A Power like that of the Gods”

Despite the centrality of the *Oba* in the political history of the Yoruba, only few studies have interrogated the nature of this sovereign office and the principles of law, politics and administration that surround the office and its functioning. For the most part, writers have focused on describing activities of particular kings and their roles in the historical process. The implication of this approach is that the institution of *Obaship* is undifferentiated. Its complexities are largely ignored. Indeed, what is most known about Yoruba *Oba* are the commonalities which they share.

Yoruba *Oba* usually trace their origins to Ile-Ife, the acclaimed ancestral source of the Yoruba and to the same ancestor. Writers such as Samuel Johnson cite the common bead,

embroidered crowns, similar political institutions and Yoruba conceptions of sacred kingship and social kinship as evidence of the common stock from which the institution derived. However substantial disagreements exist in the literature on the Yoruba Oba. First, there has been no agreement over the number of the original Yoruba princes upon whom the primogenitor ordained crowns. Claims range from seven to sixteen (Ojo, 1967). More significantly, the extent of authority of the Oba remains largely undefined, ranging from claims of semi-divinity to frailty caused by constitutional checks and balances. For instance, Biobaku (1957) describes the Oba as being next to the gods in power, and yet not a despot. The point here is that the traditions upon which the power of the Oba has been construed, including the very identity of the Yoruba, remains problematic. Peel (2001) shows that the Yoruba social and political identity only coalesced during the 19th century. It has also been argued that the claims of a common ancestry and heritage appear to be 19th and 20th centuries traditions to legitimate political innovations. Political considerations have made it expedient for communities to seek inclusion into the Yoruba heritage and construct their histories accordingly (Pemberton and Afolayan, 1996:28).

Therefore, the notion of a pre-existent Yoruba prototype Obaship institution obscures the significant variety in Yoruba kingships and the transformations of each over time. To study the Oba as an elite category requires a more particularistic and socially contextual analysis than the generalised conceptions of sacred kingships and ancestral kinships. It is in this context that we must examine Egba Oba as an elite category by transcending the notion that Yoruba Oba are undifferentiated and socially stable or that their conduct is predictable and their legitimacy unquestioned.

It is conceptually useful to revisit the historical accounts upon which the identity and powers of Egba Oba are conceived. A number of gaps in these accounts make this worthwhile. First, the Egba are not counted among the original descendants of the Yoruba primogenitor, Oduduwa. Samuel Johnson and other historians after him needed to account for the ascendancy of Abeokuta as a leading Yoruba state during the 19th century and fittingly accorded a second generation descent to the Egba. This does not suggest that the Egba were not Yoruba, it only indicates that their kingship was a later development. The tradition which posits that the mother of Yoruba kings resided at Ake is as implausible as the claim by Egba and their historians to an Ile-Ife heritage which makes them appear even more legitimate than the original seven or fourteen descendants of Oduduwa. In the same vein, the claim that Egba kingships had antecedents before the 19th century cannot be sustained by the available evidence. In the first instance, it is inconceivable that there were more than 200 kings with the authority, rituals and paraphernalia of sacred kingship in the Egba homeland, a cumulative territory of less than 100 square kilometres. If the Ife tradition holds, then Yoruba kingships were always a select few. Also, to justify that the size of these settlements were extensive, Biobaku (1957:4) cites Irving's travel on horseback through the ruins of Egba towns. However, an average distance covered in "brisk" fifteen minutes horse strides across ruins of the largest town does not speak of extensive settlements, such that could produce and sustain such a kingship structure.

It is therefore more plausible that prior to settlement in Abeokuta, the Egbas lived in scattered settlements (more likely villages) north of Abeokuta. It is likely that the larger ones

among these settlements - Iddo, Ake and Oko - grew to become cultural centres and the centres from which collective resistance against Imperial Oyo was organised in the 18th century, and from which kingly institutions may have grown. Even then, there is little to sustain the claim that a significant Yoruba prototype kingship, one other Egba settlement recognised as sovereign, developed among the Egba prior to their settlement in Abeokuta (Lloyd, 1960: 221-237).

Events in 19th century Abeokuta suggest that the notions of pre-existent Egba Oba might well be constructions of many stumbling historical claims. What marked Abeokuta out in the first half of the 19th century and at the most momentous periods of its history was the absence of an Oba; and when they did have kings, these were very weak. That there was no king did not seem an abominable situation. However, as the importance attached to monarchies increased during the 19th century, it became necessary for interested parties to advance historical claims to royal stools. One claim made in these contests - that the Egbas confronted calamity because of their failure to properly bury their previous king in the homeland - was promoted in the 1850s by the party interested in creating a monarchy. It speaks more to the politics of mobilising support than a real sense of retributive loss that well over twenty years passed before Egba elites thought it was critical to rebury their dead king.

It is evident that the monarchy acquired increased importance in the 19th century owing to certain prevailing factors. First, in the environment of warfare and insecurity, scattered settlement sought inclusion into larger communities and the defence and imperial advantages such inclusions offered. Monarchies in other Yoruba towns like Ijesha, Ekiti and Ife were either created or strengthened in these war times. Similar consolidation of kingships in Lagos and Badagry was aided by the centralisation of trade patterns. The collapse of Oyo following the Fulani invasion enhanced the stature of the monarchy in two ways. First it resulted in the scattering of the Oyo who sought to recreate their visions of imperial kingship where they could and generally promoted the idea that a flamboyant monarchy was the most prestigious political system. Also, the military progress of the Fulani was construed as an alien attack on and domination of all the Yoruba. Resisting the Fulani became a Yoruba “national” cause for which the institutions of the Alaafin, king of Oyo had to be enhanced (even though it had no effective power to muster) because it was the only symbolic rallying point of Yoruba identity. Smith records that the Alaafin gave titles to war generals, some of who translated their offices to kingships. We may also trace the ideas of absolutism to this merger of the political and military offices, especially against the background that in Old Oyo these offices were separated and the political structure was one of checks and struggles between the imperial monarchy, war chiefs and the *Oyo Mesi*, council of elders. By and large, it became important and prestigious to have kings in 19th century Yorubaland. As a nascent multi-cultural settlement, it was also expedient for the Egba to buy into these larger constructions of their identity and of the relevance of the Oba.

However, it is simplistic to assume that the process of absolutism was not intensely contested. Most existing accounts (including and especially oral traditions) highlight the powers of war-era monarchy and generalship without a corresponding attention to obvious evidence of the internal instabilities the enhanced powers of these rulers produced. The

internal schisms between imperial monarchy and a growing commercial class which Austin (1998:67) describes among contemporary Asante is curiously absent in the Yoruba historiography where it is made to appear that a political order subsisted despite growing transformations in social structure, group and individual economic statuses. A similar case can be made for the 19th century in Abeokuta where a growing economic class was not silent and uninterested in power and neither did they always conform to some traditions. My study shows that the title and powers of an Oba were never uncontested. As an elite category, the terms were not as stable as existing studies suggest and their roles and conduct were not fixed. On the contrary, Egba kingship evolved in a historical process. Far from a definite custom, its roles, powers and claims to traditions were instruments and outcomes of complex struggles for power and control.

Darker than Nights: The Ogboni as an Elite Category

Where African monarchies can claim universal similarities, the Ogboni has been the quintessential depiction of what is peculiarly African in pre-colonial politics. Chanock (1985) has promoted the ideas of pre-kingly (pre-dynastic) lineage heads as the “real rulers of the people” and the effective check to royal absolutism. In similar ways, the notion of a mystical, dark, sinister, irrational and conceptually ungraspable yet ineluctable entity pervades the scholarly and public conceptions of the Ogboni. Much of what was considered repugnant to “modernity” – including trial by ordeal, witchcraft, juju, etc. – has been associated with the council (Ibhawor, 2007:59). Partly because of its acclaimed cultic secrecy and in spite of its looming presence in the socio-cultural worldview and political history of the Yoruba, the Ogboni has not been subjected to any rigorous research beyond accounts of its actions, religious roles and arts (Akere, 1980; Morton-Williams, 1960).

Shed of its mysteries, the Ogboni was a political council responsible for law and order. A society of the most powerful, wealthy and influential men and women, its members met every seventeen days to adjudicate civil disputes, deal with criminal cases and conduct other such political and ritual functions as were necessary. According to Biobaku (1957), the Ogboni constituted at once the civic court, the town council, and the Electoral College for the selection of the Oba. They served as the intermediary between the king and his subjects to ensure the subordination of the latter and to prevent the former from becoming a despot. As a civic council, membership of the Ogboni included sectional and lineage heads, war leaders, leaders of trade and craft guilds, women chiefs and priests. Therefore, “the real rulers of the town were the Ogboni.” However, it is for the powers and rituals of the inner caucus of six (or more), the *Iwarefa*, that the Ogboni was most feared and respected. Members were sworn to oaths of secrecy. They met at night and in secret and conducted communal rituals. The *Oro* (a policing agency) was the main instrument of the Ogboni to secure their mysteries and achieve social conformity.

It is necessary to divest the Ogboni of some of its folkloric ascriptions before its identity and roles as an elite group can be understood. One implication of not doing so is that this all-important council of elites appear as a unified and undifferentiated entity, when the historical records suggest intense competition and rivalry among the members and ever-present limitations of its powers and privileges. Furthermore, failing to study the Ogboni secures the

notion that people were historically subdued by its assumed veil of darkness and metaphysical presence when there is considerable evidence to show that the people of Abeokuta were never cowed or subdued but rather willing to challenge such claims. Also, the notions of absolute secrecy need to be analysed. Onadeko (2007) likens the secrecy of the Ogboni to the Vatican idiom: “We don’t lie at the Vatican, but we don’t always tell.” In the Yoruba case, there could only be a minute component of social discourse that was not already public knowledge. As a civic or town council, the Ogboni debated publicly; the leaders of the Council, including the *Iwarefa*, were publicly known; the meeting place, *Ita Ogboni*, was a public square; and the ritual sites, including the sacred places and groove, *Igbo Oro*, were known though inaccessible. The myths and mysteries of the Ogboni need to be re-evaluated as a construction of power by an elite category to secure their positions and promote their interests in the society. Those interests need to be analysed with the object of deciphering the interplay of political ideas upon which society is formed and operates.

Lloyds (1960) considers the Ogboni the principal organ of Egba government in Abeokuta. Indeed in the absence of a monarchy, governance was conducted by this council of leading influential members. However, it was a much more complex history than the assumption of a smoothly run traditional systems in which roles were well imbibed and respected. In the first instance, given the patterns of settlement and the efforts at managing the complex federation, there had to have been councils for each of the settling groups. Early missionary accounts emphasise that the hierarchy of authority was not well defined and that there were struggles among the leading persons. Bashorun Sodeke, the leader of the Egba Ogboni (c.1830-1844) could only claim a moral leadership based on his age and military experience. Until the middle of the 19th century, power was so widely diffused beyond the Ogboni, that one principal actor stated that “he who owns the power, rules the city,” underscoring that there was no absolute hegemonic stability or ideological unity (CMS, 1847).

The case is sustainable that power was more diffused in the Yoruba world than the assumptions of stable political structures and peaceful lineage fraternity allow. The Yoruba worldview from which conceptions of a sacred kingship and notions of a mysterious Ogboni derive contained many facilities of power which could not be limited to a definitive elite structure and which were available to able and aspiring individuals and groups. The earth (*orisha*) cult of which the Oba is acclaimed as sacred and the Ogboni its leading worshippers also had priests, mediums and other adherents with varying capacity to claim and deploy its power (Ojo, 1967: 97). In other words, ecclesiastical authority cannot be singular or hierarchical in a polytheistic cosmology. A semblance of how widely diffused power was within polytheistic cosmologies can be found in Peires (1989) account of the Xhosa cattle-killing movement of 1856-7 in Cape Colony. In this case, a sixteen year old tells a culturally plausible story and with her uncle exercises considerable influence on chiefs and priests over a wide region. In the Yoruba accounts, migrations, wars and heroic deeds are usually credited to some divination by local priests who are not necessarily Ogboni. Missionaries record the existence of powerful individuals, known for their charms and power and who were not chiefs. Divination and priestly admonitions were very common in the political discourse in Abeokuta during this period. Therefore, to suggest that the Ogboni “six” was always the most ineluctably powerful and feared factor in the social system or that this

institution constituted a cultic unity hides the variety of ideas that contested Ogboni issues. There was in fact a wide continuum of power; the council was only an axis of power relations in fluid collaboration and contestation with other power blocs. Part of the story of the Ogboni in Abeokuta was their struggle to retain power and social relevance against other contesting ideas and institutions. It needs be mentioned early on that in this struggle from the mid 19th century, the Ogboni did not constitute a traditional alternative, but they deployed what may be termed modernist resources.

The 19th century was particularly turbulent for the Yoruba. Civil war in Oyo and a Fulani invasion led to the sacking of the empire, massive population displacements and internecine struggles among successor states to Oyo (Ajayi and Smith, 1971:11). Smith has argued that improvisation and expedience, rather than customs or traditions, were the engines that drove societies in times of instability. It can be argued that the uncertainties of the 19th century rendered customary conventions inapplicable; they created new dynamics by which power is defined. It was in this environment that Abeokuta was settled by refugees from these conflicts. The new settlement soon engaged in its own wars, to secure itself against powerful enemies (Ibadan, Ijebu, Dahomey and the Lagos colony) and assert enough influence to partake in and control a share of the Atlantic trade. Domestically, this led to the rise of a powerful military class and a struggle by a civil authority to control it. As an elite category, the *Ologun* (war) chieftaincies may be a 19th century creation among the Egba. Traditions suggest that before this period there were no offices particularly devoted to war or those offices had become disused on account of the imperial rule of Oyo in the 18th century. The rendition of Egba's most remembered "national war of independence" against Oyo rule supports the absence of any organised form of military activities. The Lisabi legend is the account of a farmer who mobilised, organised and led a successful resistance against Oyo. Biobaku (1957: 13) further notes that the Egba may have adopted the military titles of other Yoruba armies at Ibadan. More local variants and a refinement of titles were to occur in the 19th century as Abeokuta fought its own wars. Yet military titles and leadership were important forms of political power. Contrary to views that the Yoruba did not have a standing army but mobilised as required, that their wars were primitive forays for slaves and booty, and that they practised neither strategy nor tactics, Ajayi and Smith (1971: 54) show that by the early 19th century, the Yoruba had developed a complex and flexible military system which could adapt to the changes occasioned by available firearms.

Captain Arthur Jones, an officer of the British regiment stationed in Sierra-Leone, wrote a report on the military capabilities of the Egba during his visit to Egba war camps in May, 1861. In this report, Jones pointed to the roles of war chiefs in public decision-making. According to him, the political constitution was a federation of sectional chiefs and influential citizens. The decision to go to war was taken at the convocation of the Ogboni in which leading chiefs and influential men and women could express their opinions. Once the decision had been taken in favour of war, chiefs enlarged their small band of warriors (which they kept in times of peace) by conscripting the farming population. Military titles were therefore important because they generally overlapped with political roles. A war leader would conceivably also be a chief of sorts in his section, would be able to exercise control over traders and priests and be a member of the *Ogboni*. The leading chiefs in 19th century Abeokuta were also war leaders.

Important as war chiefs were in this era of confusion, they did not constitute an undifferentiated elite category and their control of social resources even in times of war was often tenuous. That a decision to go to war had to be taken at a public meeting of the *Ogboni* afforded anti-war interests an opportunity for dissent. Wars had to be justified as national and necessary to co-opt all the sections, especially because of the network of connections with other Yoruba groups that different sections of Abeokuta shared. Even in the event of a collectively agreed campaign, public support for and enlistment in the wars could not be taken for granted. Indeed, there is much evidence to show that mobilising farmers for war was always a challenge to military and political leaders. Military chiefs were also very limited in their capacity to exercise power and control for other reasons.

Given that there were many chiefs, many wealthy persons who kept their own guards and many *Onisunmomi* (bands of warriors who lived on slavery), this elite category had to have been fluid. The warrior as an elite category crossed a wide latitude in itself and it was deeply connected to other elite groups. In other words, not only was candidature to these offices open to many able individuals, the same individuals could circulate in all elite categories. In any case, as British intervention and colonialism put a stop to warfare in the region, military offices ran out of practical functions. It is a mark of its fluidity and adaptability as an elite category that local military offices retained their status into the 20th century and are still being filled up to this date. Like the *Ogboni* or the monarchy, it is analytically obstructive to cast military chieftaincies as independent actors without an aggregation of the multiple and diverse identities and interests at play.

My assessment of the local politics and its elite actors is that elite categories were tenuous and interconnected. Not only were the offices including the monarchy and *Ogboni* open to many able individuals, the same individuals could circulate in all elite categories. In the case of the monarchy, the conception of national kinship and widespread polygamy progressively widened the number of claimants to royalty; by the end of the 19th century there were at least five monarchs in Abeokuta, each with at least four ruling houses from which the king could be chosen. The constant requirements for membership of the *Ogboni* or the *Ologun* appear to have been wealth and influence, age, experience and military success – in that order. None of the offices was directly hereditary and there were no cases of pre-ordination. Elites were always contesting among themselves for all political offices. It is in this sense that Peel suggests that the dominant pursuit of the average Yoruba in the 19th century was power. If power was well structured, as the view of stable pre-colonial hegemony suggests, then the terms of its acquisition would be very clear. Peel shows through missionary records that Yorubas were always searching for new resources to build social stability and mobility, and interpreting and reinventing existing ones. What defined Egba elites was not just a place on the political hierarchy but the skills and capacity to deploy resources in staking claims to pre-eminence.

From Slaves to Lords: The Educated as an Elite Category

It was a diffused elite structure that educated Africans entered into and developed within during 19th century, which partly accounts for their early rise as culture and power brokers

in Abeokuta. The dominant writings on the African educated elite depict their entrance into assumedly stable African hegemonies as momentous and revolutionary, and their identity and creed as directly opposed to pre-existing African worldviews. Much has been written within this framework of how educated elites were harbingers of modernity, helping to spread Christianity, challenging “obnoxious” traditional practices, and transforming Africans from the past towards a future. What has been lacking in many accounts is that sense of a process by which the “new” Africans invented their elite status and how they were so recognised by what has been tagged the traditional structure. From the purview of the local, how did new Christians, who were former slaves become elites? If African elite structures were static and inflexible this process should be more cataclysmic than the historical reality suggests. On the contrary, a diffused elite structure of unsure hegemonic values, intensely contested ideologies and an open competitive political structure is a better explanation for the entry and rise of educated elites in the complex elite politics.

Educated elites were themselves not a single undifferentiated unit and their interests and conduct were not altogether defined by their acquired western identities and aspirations. The influx into Abeokuta of liberated slaves from Sierra-Leone, Brazil and Cuba from 1839 included many who had acquired a European-style education, Christianity and western ways. Ayandele (1966) estimates that there may have been as many as 5000 Saros in Abeokuta by 1860. Missionary presence in Abeokuta resulted in the establishment of schools, churches, a printing press and newspaper among many other western forms. These were established to cater for the resettlers lest they reverted to heathen ways and as part of the evangelistic project of the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS). Three distinct sub-groups of the educated can be identified: namely the “Aku,” their children or Saro, and the natives. The Aku were former slave or children of slaves, rescued by British naval anti-slavery patrols and resettled in Sierra-Leone. It was in Sierra-Leone that they became so named on account of their cultural peculiarities, especially their language and greeting style. Their return to Abeokuta was partly to re-establish themselves among their kith and kin. Those among them newly sold into slavery and not extensively de-cultured of their Yoruba worldview found it easy to integrate into the local structures.

A major concern of the missionaries was the number of resettlers who were going “native.” This group, then, contested the meanings of their new Christian faith against the expediencies of living as Yoruba in Abeokuta (CMS, 1847). They tended more towards an indigenous strategy to transform Abeokuta in line with their visions of modernity. On the other hand, those who were less instilled in the Egba ways found themselves critical of Egba politics and culture. Of this type, the “Saro” must be differentiated from their “Aku” parents. Mostly Protestant missionaries, clerks, teachers and traders, usually bearing “foreign” names like Johnson, Titcombe, Vaughan, Crowder, Lawson etc., they were culturally closer to the European missionaries and merchants and were soon to form the core of the critics who challenged the local elite system. When the missionaries were expelled by a local uprising in 1867, many of the Saros moved to Ebute Metta, near Lagos. Because they had already acquired a measure of Egbaness, they retained claims to Egba citizenship. They were also deeply involved in the Victorian society that had developed in Lagos and soon became leading professionals and socialites. This crop of Egba leaders played significant roles in using missionary resources and the colonial government to push the Egba towards their

vision of modernity. They were particularly active through their associations including the Abeokuta Patriotic Association (1893) and the Egba National Council (1898). They were usually disposed to being used by the Egba establishment in pursuit of national goals. They keep a foot each in Abeokuta and Lagos.

It was not long before an indigenous educated elite group developed from the products of mission schools. These were initially recruited from among the children of chiefs and slaves who were redeemed by the missionaries, but their numbers grew as public consciousness of the social values of education grew. Lacking the wider connections of the Saro, this group sought careers in the local public service of the Egba governments. A significant number of them were local letter writers and interpreters. This group did not become significantly powerful until the 20th century when they constituted an opposition to the Lagos-based Egbas' visions of modernity. Unlike the Saros, they claimed more sectional identity than the Egba collective and were therefore in the heart of the discourse of what it meant to be Egba.

Thus, while the educated constituted an elite category with clear differences from other groups and the wider society, this elite was not fixed or undifferentiated. Its members shared similar ideas of a modern society, but they differed on meanings of that modernity and the strategies to achieve it. Contrary to the dominant views that the educated elites were predominantly concerned with matters of Atlantic discourse - racism, colonialism, nationalism and pan-Africanism - a considerable part of the interests and activities of elites were devoted to more locally germane issues. These issues - including chieftaincy, marriage, witchcraft etc. - were critical to the definition of meanings and the resolution of confusions that pervaded colonised Egba society in the 19th and 20th centuries. Similarly, in much contrast to the assumption that the intellectual thought and production of the educated were in monolingual and monocultural forms, usually in the coloniser's language and within a conception of European modernity, it is obvious that educated Africans thought in and expressed themselves in local worldviews. They navigated multiple spatial and cultural terrains, expressed themselves in local languages and idioms and thought in terms of local cosmologies and convictions as they engaged in local discourses. Their entry into and development within these societies was significant but not earth-shaking and it took time within the complex inter-elite struggles and social contestations for meanings before they became recognised elites and power brokers.

Missionaries and the Christian Elite

Perhaps the greatest marker of how fluid and flexible the Egba political system was can be found in the roles played by missionaries and European agents in the formation of Egba society. The conventional treatment of the missionary roles has focused on the constructivist capacities of European culture and power to transform Africans. In this framework, European missionaries are depicted as having created a new elite which colonial agents were empowered to battle obnoxious African regimes and cultures. For the most part, missionaries are assumed to be agents external to the dynamic processes by which African societies were transformed by European cultural and colonial power. However, the historical evidence does not suggest that European missionaries sought to be or were separated from these societies.

They were conscious that evangelistic results could not be achieved by their very presence alone and generally sought to work within local systems to relay their message and the benefits of conversion. So involved were missionaries in the Egba case that they soon constituted a European sub-elite of an African power system.

A convergence of interests and exigencies made Abeokuta suitable for the goals of missionaries and abolitionists in the 19th century. The willingness of its leaders to accept European and Christian settlement where neighbouring kingdoms were very sceptical, the prospects of its cotton production and its increasing Christian and “civilized” population, created for Abeokuta an image of a “Sunshine in the Tropics” which fitted well to the “Buxton principle,” the abolitionist idea of a Christian foothold from which the light of salvation and civilization could spread to the “dark continent”. To achieve their goals, missionaries attempted to shape local politics. Indeed, Henry Townsend of the CMS exercised so considerable an influence over the Ogboni, that he was thought to have “gone native” by his fellow Europeans (Biobaku, 1957: 47). In reality, missionary and European power became resources which were contested over in the interplay of elite politics. Progressively, European missionaries with their Christian adherents constituted an elite group and a political party, the Christian Party, through which they tried to influence politics including succession, boundary delineation, and sectional advantages. It is partly due to the involvement of Europeans in Abeokuta that the Egba were able to secure their state until 1914, despite British colonial acquisition of what later became Nigeria.

Missions necessarily became involved in the sectional politics of Abeokuta. Whereas the CMS was the predominant mission of the Ake section, other sections attracted missions of their own: Baptists were prominent in Owu and the Catholics held sway among the Gbagura. Therefore, there was considerable competition among the missions borne not only out of doctrinal differences but also from the political interests of their sectional hosts and benefactors. Missions competed to secure the patronage of leading Egba chiefs. It was advantageous to have a chief as a member (if not a convert) because this guaranteed security and a high turn-out at church services. As such while local chiefs contested over who should host a missionary or on whose land the mission should be located, missionaries struggled over which leading chiefs would attend their church or open-air services. Moreover, since church attendance was the only outward evidence of conversion, it was always difficult to determine genuine African converts. Some among the early settlers contested the doctrines with the missionaries especially on matters such as polygamy, slavery and pawnship. Leading Ogboni chiefs attended church regularly and the state itself soon created Christian chieftaincies. In 1890, missionaries and leading Christians formed the Reformed Ogboni movement with a view partly to parallel the social power and privileges of the authentic organ and partly to create a cultural alternative for their members. Soon enough there was little difference between the “dark, evil Ogboni” and the modern one; some will say between the so-called traditional and the so-called modern.

Conclusion

To suggest that missionaries and indeed every elite category acted in definite and independent ways obscures the complex interests and intricate processes by which Egba

society was shaped. Elite categories are arenas of individual and subgroup interest and each represents the modicum of agreeable conditions around which its members cohere. A society's elite politics must be interpreted, not as the performance of its political structures and representative elites, but as a complex interplay of interests, with actors claiming and appropriating diffused and undifferentiated identities.

The dominant framework from which African history is written has privileged educated Africans over other elite groups by writing the history of modern Africa around them. These Africans are presented as though they are apart from other Africans, specially equipped with the tools of modernisation with which they displaced traditional elite groups to inherit power in the post-colonial state. Part of the disappointment with contemporary African leadership derives from the assumption that they should know better, being better equipped. This paper has shown that the dominant historiography is a misrepresentation of the historical process by which post-colonial African leadership is produced. African leaders are not the products of European engineering and their identity and concerns transcend the European brand of modernity. Rather, they were produced in that complex historical process in which ideas, interests, groups and individuals struggled to make sense of life and society amidst the revolutionary changes of the 19th century. Power was central to these struggles; securing it to pursue interests and project visions of how society should be, pitched individuals and groups in fluid elite formations with and against one another.

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